10-Step Brain PowerUp Guide

Boost your thinking, memory, mood & focus *in minutes*

BeBrainFit.com

1 Take a Breather

Time: 5 minutes

Every day you take tens of thousands of breaths and 20% of the oxygen you inhale is used by your brain.

Oxygen is so critical for brain cells that they can live for just a few minutes without it.

It may be hard to accept that you aren't breathing "properly," but few people do.

Ideally, you should breathe deeply from your diaphragm, not your chest.

(Children naturally breathe this way until the constant stress of life retrains them to breathe shallowly.)

The next time you are feeling tired, foggy, and mentally unfocused, take a 5-minute breathing break to flood your brain with more oxygen.

Here's a basic belly, or diaphragmatic, breathing exercise to give your brain more of the oxygen it needs to thrive.

Belly Breathing Exercise

Sit comfortably or lie down.

Place one hand on your chest and one on your stomach.

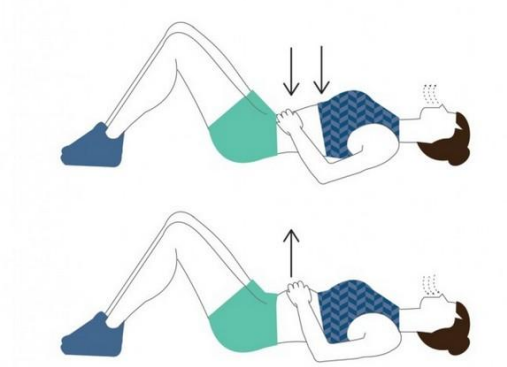


Image courtesy of Amanda Soto, Washington Post

Slowly exhale through your mouth, focusing on keeping your chest still while allowing your stomach to *sink* towards your ribcage.

Then slowly inhale through your nose, concentrating on keeping your chest still while *expanding* your stomach.

Action Steps

Practice belly breathing a minimum of 5 minutes per day to reduce stress and bathe your brain in healing oxygen.

In a hurry? Even taking just 10 belly breaths can help you relax and think more clearly.

Suggested Reading

15 Stress Management Techniques That Work Well ... and Fast

2 Stay Hydrated

Time: 5 minutes

Your brain is largely water and it takes only 2% dehydration to negatively affect your memory, attention, and other cognitive skills.

These mental effects can happen surprisingly quickly -- you can lose 10% of your body's water after one good exercise workout.

The effects of dehydration on the brain are so pronounced that they can mimic the symptoms of dementia.

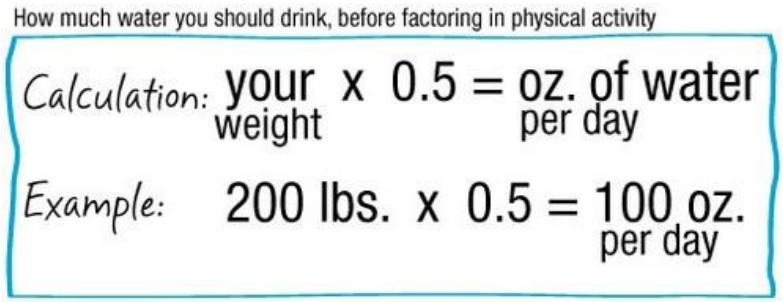
So the next time you feel mentally fuzzy, grab your water bottle.

Your brain may simply be signaling that it is getting dehydrated.

The usual rule of thumb is "8 glasses a day."

But a more precise way of determining how much water you need is to multiply your weight (in pounds) by 0.5.

Your daily water intake goal is that number in ounces of water.


How much water you should drink, before factoring in physical activity
Calculation: your weight x 0.5 = oz. of water per day
Example: 200 lbs. x 0.5 = 100 oz. per day

If you exercise, check out this online hydration calculator from the water bottle company Camelbak.

It takes into account variables such as your type of activity, intensity, duration, temperature, and even cloud cover.

If drinking water does not come naturally to you, download an app like Waterlogged or Daily Water to remind you to drink enough.

Action Steps

Determine how much water you need, then start drinking!

Suggested Reading

Essential Nutrients for a Healthy Brain

Fluoride As a Neurotoxin: 9 Ways It Harms Your Brain

3 Drink Caffeine in Moderation

Time: 5 minutes

Few people drink only water, so now is a great time to discuss drinks that contain caffeine, the world's favorite cognitive enhancer.

Literally billions of people around the world start their day with caffeine to enhance their mood, energy, focus, and productivity.

The source of your caffeine really makes a difference to your brain and in the way you feel.

Traditional brews like coffee, tea, and yerba mate are loaded with antioxidants, flavonoids, and other beneficial compounds that nourish the brain and increase mental vitality.

But caffeinated drinks like soda and energy drinks are loaded with sugar and chemicals instead.

And there's nothing natural about the caffeine they contain.

That caffeine is a synthetic chemical that's almost always made in China.

If you suspect that caffeine is contributing to your stress or insomnia, you are probably onto something.

Rather than giving up caffeine completely, consider switching to green tea -- maybe the healthiest drink of all.

Green tea contains a modest amount of caffeine, only one-fourth of that found in coffee.

It owes its major health benefits to two unique compounds, EGCG and l-theanine.

EGCG and l-theanine work synergistically to promote attention, memory, and learning.

Both EGCG and l-theanine have the unique capability of altering your brainwaves, putting you in a mental state similar to meditation.

L-theanine is renowned for its ability to put you in that sweet spot of feeling calm, yet mentally clear.

And unlike other caffeinated drinks which disrupt sleep, green tea's l-theanine can help you sleep better.

Some people though, especially those prone to anxiety and insomnia, find the downside of caffeine outweighs the benefits, no matter what.

If that's the case for you, give decaffeinated green tea a try.

Action Steps

Drink caffeine in moderation from natural sources like coffee, yerba mate, and especially green tea.

Suggested Reading

How L-Theanine Benefits Stress, Anxiety and Focus

Why Natural Energy Drinks Are Better for Your Brain

15 Links Between Caffeine and Anxiety

Caffeinated: How Our Daily Habit Helps, Hurts, and Hooks Us by Murray Carpenter

4 Add Brain Foods to Your Shopping List

Time: 10 minutes

The human brain is the most marvelous, complicated structure known in the universe.

So treat it with respect and power it with the best possible fuel.

Eating processed foods that contain sugar and trans fats can leave you feeling mentally foggy, anxious, and depressed.

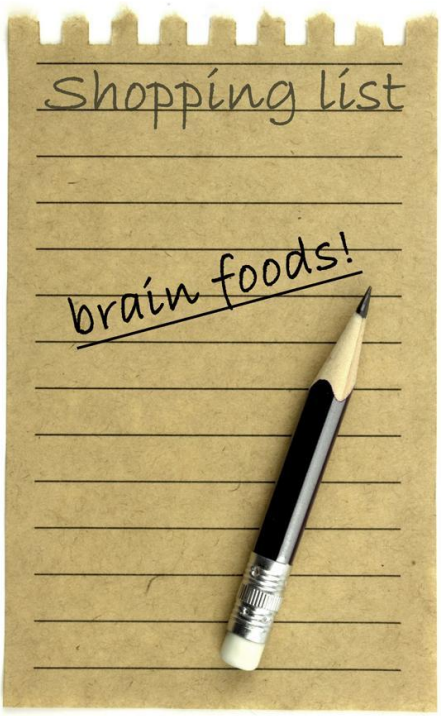
But certain foods particularly high in the nutrients needed to create, protect, and repair cells will help keep your brain humming along smoothly.

Eating these "brain foods" can keep you mentally sharp, positive, and productive.

Other foods supply the building blocks of neurotransmitters -- brain chemicals that control how well you learn and remember, how happy and motivated you are, and how well you can relax and enjoy life.

Here are the top 12 foods that should be on every brain-healthy shopping list:

- avocados
- berries of all kinds
- coconut oil
- dark chocolate
- eggs (cage-free)
- extra virgin olive oil
- fermented foods (look for "active cultures")
- green leafy vegetables
- salmon (wild caught)
- sea vegetables
- turmeric (spice or tea)
- walnuts



You can learn why each of these foods is on this list and what they can do for your brain in our guide 12 Brain Foods That Supercharge Your Memory, Focus & Mood.

Action Steps

Add a few of these foods to your grocery list every time you go shopping.

Soon, your kitchen will be well-stocked with foods that literally help build a better brain.

Suggested Reading

Balancing Neurotransmitters to Take Control of Your Life

50 Yummy & Healthy Brain Food Recipes

25 Tasty Snacks Featuring the Best Brain Foods

Salt Sugar Fat: How the Food Giants Hooked Us by Michael Moss

5 Take a Power Nap

Time: 20 minutes

While you are sleeping, your brain is busy repairing itself, creating new brain cells, and rearranging and consolidating the memories of the day.

But unfortunately, few people get enough sleep.

So the next time you feel mentally foggy, distracted, and unproductive, grab a few winks instead of more caffeine.

A 20-minute nap will give you maximum revitalization in the minimum amount of time.

(Nap much longer and you risk waking up groggy or disturbing your nighttime sleep.)

Research shows that taking a quick nap boosts mood, alertness, energy, creativity, and productivity even more than drinking coffee!

And unexpectedly, these positive effects of an afternoon nap will stick with you the rest of the day, without the caffeine crash or jitters.

You may think you don't have time to take a nap, but some of the most productive people in history made it a priority -- Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein, Leonardo da Vinci, Winston Churchill, and a handful of US presidents.

Some forward-thinking companies like Google, Ben & Jerry's, Zappos, and British Airways encourage their employees to nap.

If your workplace isn't among them, you'll find tips for how to take a socially acceptable power nap while at work here.

Action Steps

The next time you feel in need of a mental recharge, skip the caffeinated drink and take a nap.

Suggested Reading

How to Power Nap — For a Better Mental Boost than Caffeine

Mental Effects of Chronic Insomnia (+ how to stop it)

Take a Nap! Change Your Life by Dr. Sara Mednick

Power Sleep : The Revolutionary Program That Prepares Your Mind for Peak Performance by Dr. James B. Maas

6 Move Your Body

Time: 10 minutes

You almost certainly know the many benefits of physical exercise for the body.

But you may not realize that moving your body is one of the best things you can do for your brain as well.

Exercise stimulates the growth of new brain cells and helps virtually all mental health conditions.

You don't have to exercise strenuously to experience significant brain benefits.

Ten minutes of walking, or gentle exercise like yoga, tai chi, or qi gong can enhance your mood, memory, and concentration.

Exercise is also one of the best stress busters around.

If you can, get that 10 minutes of exercise outside.

Exercising outdoors -- compared to indoors -- is more beneficial for your mental performance, memory, mood, energy, and attention span.

And if you can't exercise outdoors, even gazing out a window or looking at a picture of nature or a house plant while you move will do!

One last simple but powerful tip.

Too much sitting will make you mentally sluggish, yet most of us spend 12 hours or more per day on our bottoms.

As former NASA Director of Life Sciences, Dr. Joan Vernikos was in charge of keeping astronauts fit in space.

She discovered a ridiculously easy way to counteract the effects of too much sitting.

The answer was not more exercise, it was simply standing up frequently throughout the day.

Action Steps

Get 10 minutes of exercise every day, outside if possible.

Get out of your chair frequently, ideally 30 times a day.

Suggested Reading

Top 15 Brain Exercises to Keep Your Mind Sharp

Sitting Kills, Moving Heals by Dr. Joan Vernikos

Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain by Dr. John Ratey

7 Meditate

Time: 5 - 10 minutes

The human brain has been called a "random thought generator" that creates over 50,000 thoughts per day.

And for most people, around 70% of this mental chatter is negative.

It's not hard to see why learning to quiet your mind with meditation would be useful.

According to Cornell University, over 1,000 studies have been published proving the health benefits of meditation.

Meditation can make you happier, smarter, and more resilient to life's ups and downs.

Frequent meditators report improved focus and concentration, greater creativity, reduced stress, and better sleep.

Research shows that regular meditation can actually decrease your biological age by 12 years.

Meditation may be simple but it can be frustrating.

Fortunately, there are plenty of resources to get you started the right way.

You'll find free meditations on a wide variety of sites including UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center, Zen 12, Mindvalley Meditations, and Headspace.

Action Steps

Commit to meditating 5 to 10 minutes every day for the next 11 days.

Research shows that those who meditate daily for 11 days build a meditation habit and 90% are likely to continue.

If you are new to meditation, read about our meditation techniques for beginners.

Suggested Reading

Binaural Beats: A Meditation Shortcut

Top 10 Meditation Techniques and Tips for Beginners

8 Take Your Vitamins

Time: 1 minute

Almost everyone is looking for that "magic bullet" pill to lift their mood, boost their memory, or help them excel at school or work.

You may be surprised to learn that taking a brain or memory supplement is not the best place to start.

There are two core supplements that almost everyone can benefit from instead.

First, take a high-quality multivitamin supplement.

It's not as sexy-sounding as taking the latest "smart pill," but the research is clear -- *taking a multivitamin alone can improve your mood and overall brain function*.

All vitamins and minerals play a role in brain health.

Vitamin C, for example, protects your brain from free radical damage, toxins, and aging, and acts as a natural antidepressant.

Without adequate amounts of vitamin B6, folic acid, and magnesium, you can't synthesize the "happiness" neurotransmitter serotonin.

Yet surprisingly, nutritional deficiencies are not a thing of the past.

Deficiencies of vitamin B12, vitamin D, magnesium, and omega-3s are common, yet all are essential for brain health and mental well-being.

Taking a multivitamin/mineral supplement as nutritional insurance can help you be healthier, happier, and may even help you live longer.

Another foundational supplement is an omega-3 supplement.

One omega-3 fatty acid in particular, DHA (docosahexaenoic acid), is a major structural component of the cerebral cortex, the part of your brain responsible for memory, language, creativity, emotion, and attention.

People low in DHA have measurably smaller brains.

DHA can be found in fish oil, krill oil, or a DHA supplement.

Action Steps

Take a high-quality multivitamin and omega-3 supplement every day.

Don't know how to judge the quality of a supplement?

Read our guide on how to choose a nutritional supplement.

Suggested Reading

Brain Vitamins: Essential for a Healthy Brain

The Brain Benefits of Omega-3 Fats

DHA Supplements: Why They're Critical for Your Brain

8 Ways Magnesium Relieves Anxiety and Stress

9 Check Your Medicine Cabinet

Time: 20 minutes

American physicians write over 2 *billion* drug prescriptions every year.

A surprising number of them can affect your mood, memory, and mental clarity and even set you up for dementia later in life.

Some of the worst culprits are the "anti drugs" (*anti*histamines, *anti*depressants, *anti*psychotics, *anti*biotics), statin cholesterol-lowering drugs, and sleeping pills.

There's an entire group of drugs called *anticholinergics* that work by blocking the action of acetylcholine, the neurotransmitter of memory and learning.

You can download this list of anticholinergic drugs compiled by the Indiana University Center for Aging Research.

Additionally, you can check all the medications you are currently taking to determine your *anticholinergic burden* with this online calculator.

Alarmingly, even popular over-the-counter remedies like Benadryl, Pepcid AC, and Tylenol are not benign -- they can greatly increase your risk of dementia.

If you take any prescription medications that you suspect are adversely affecting your mood or memory, we recommend following the advice of pharmacist Armon B. Neel, Jr.

He has devoted his career to helping people avoid over-medicating themselves.

He believes that three out of four cases of dementia are induced by prescription drugs.

You'll find his step-by-step plan on how to work with your doctor to minimize your use of drugs here.

Action Steps

Check your medicine cabinet for any medications that could be affecting your brain.

If you are unsure, you can run any prescription or over-the-counter remedy through the Drugs.com side effect checker.

Look for natural alternatives for any over-the-counter remedies you take regularly.

If you take any suspect prescription medications, follow Armon B. Neel's plan outlined in our article Drugs That Cause Memory Loss (& what you can do).

This will help you have an informed discussion with your health care provider.

Suggested Reading

Are Your Prescriptions Killing You? by Armon B. Neel, Jr, PharmD, CGP, FASCP

10 Skyrocket Your Productivity with a Pomodoro

Time: 25 minutes

Pomodoro is the Italian word for tomato.

It's also the name of our favorite, and deceptively simple, concentration and productivity hack.

The Pomodoro Technique was developed by an Italian graduate student as a study aid.

It works like this:

- Get yourself a basic timer.
- Pick a task you want to concentrate on.
- Remove obvious distractions (like turning off your phone).
- Set the timer for 25 minutes, then give the task at hand your all. (You may find this hard at first, but it *will* get easier with practice.)
- If your mind starts to wander, snap yourself back to the present and remind yourself that you need to maintain this level of concentration for just a few more minutes.
- When the 25 minutes are done, take a break.

We think you'll be pleasantly surprised at how much you get done.

When you're ready, do another "pomodoro" -- a 25-minute block of intense concentration.

With each pomodoro, you are doing more than just spending time in a state of highly productive focus.

You are actually training your brain to block out distractions and increase your ability to concentrate for extended periods of time without a timer.

Action Steps

Find a timer and do your first pomodoro.

Or use TomatoTimer.com on your mobile device or desktop instead.

Suggested Reading

Learn How to Concentrate: It's A Skill You Can Master

7 Ways Multitasking Hurts Brain Health and Performance

The Man Who Lied to His Laptop by Dr. Clifford Nass

About Our Suggested Reading

Our suggested reading gives you an in-depth look at the ideas behind each brain hack.

Most are links to comprehensive articles, complete with references to supporting scientific literature, studies, and expert opinions, on Be Brain Fit.

We've also included links to a few high-quality, relevant books available on Amazon.com.

15 Stress Management Techniques That Work Well ... and Fast

Essential Nutrients for a Healthy Brain

Fluoride As a Neurotoxin: 9 Ways It Harms Your Brain

How L-Theanine Benefits Stress, Anxiety and Focus

Why Natural Energy Drinks Are Better for Your Brain

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Sitting Kills, Moving Heals by Dr. Joan Vernikos

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Binaural Beats: A Meditation Shortcut

Top 10 Meditation Techniques and Tips for Beginners

Benefits of Meditation for Depression: Why It Works So Well

Meditation for Anxiety: Proven Way to Calm Your Mind

How to Choose Nutritional Supplements That Work

Brain Vitamins: Essential for a Healthy Brain

The Brain Benefits of Omega-3 Fats

DHA Supplements: Why They're Critical for Your Brain

8 Ways Magnesium Relieves Anxiety and Stress

Drugs That Cause Memory Loss (& what you can do)

Are Your Prescriptions Killing You? by Armon B. Neel, Jr, PharmD, CGP, FASCP

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7 Ways Multitasking Hurts Brain Health and Performance

The Man Who Lied to His Laptop by Dr. Clifford Nass

WHAT TO DO NEXT

1

Send a message to our personal email address askus@bebrainfit.com to let us know what you think of this guide.

2

Read the emails we send you each week, then take action!

And follow us on Facebook.

3

Give yourself a round of applause!

You started building a better brain just by reading this guide.

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